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GOVERNOR HARRISON'S ADDRESS AT WOODSTOCK.

July 4th, 1885.

[From the Independent, July 9, 1885.]

Men renowned in arts and in arms—statesmen, scholars, poets, warriors—have assembled here with us to celebrate the birth of the Republic, and to renew the expression of their faith in the fundamental doctrine of the Republic, the doctrine that “government of the people ought to be government for the people and by the people.”

For a solemn confession of that faith I know of no place in the world more appropriate, in some respects, than the place where we now stand. For this town of Woodstock is a Connecticut town. As such it is endowed with all the rights and powers which belong to every Connecticut town. It is a political organism of a peculiar character, worth the careful study of every political philosopher. It is in fact a little Republic in itself, an indestructible Republic, in which the principle of Democratic government has full play, and where the free action of that principle is guaranteed by the strongest constitutional defenses. It may be worth our while to look at this little Republic for a few moments and see how it is organized, what are its powers, and how it acts.

The people of Woodstock number not far from three thousand. They constitute a town. All the powers of the town are exercised by the “freemen” or legal voters, some five or six hundred in number. The suffrage is manhood suffrage, and the freemen are all equal in rights. They constitute the legislative body, the town meeting, and they choose all the town officers. The basis of the town organization therefore it is absolutely democratic. The town is a free democracy.

It is indestructible. The Constitution confirms its perpetual existence. The government of the State cannot destroy it or merge it in any other town without its consent.

It elects its own officers of local government—not by permission of the General Assembly but by its own right. The Constitution gives it the indefeasible right of electing annually its own selectmen and all its other numerous officers of local police. The State government cannot take away this right or interfere with it.

It elects its own justices of the peace, each of whom is vested with a limited, but still considerable, jurisdiction in civil and criminal

causes. The State government cannot appoint them. Nobody but the freemen of the town itself can appoint them.

The officers of the justice courts—the grand jurors, who prosecute criminals before them, and the constable, who serves their process and executes their judgments—are appointed by the town. The State government cannot appoint them, or interfere with the action of the town in appointing them, so long as their offices exist.

As a probate district it elects its own judge of probate, who exercises that wide jurisdiction over the settlement of estates, the appointment of trustees and guardians, and so forth, which is usually exercised by courts of probate, or surrogates' or orphans' courts, as they are sometimes called in other States.

A probate district may include two or more towns, but each one of thirteen out of fifteen towns in this county is a probate district by itself. Woodstock is such a district. The freemen of this town therefore choose their own judge of probate, and the State government cannot take away or limit their right to do so. And this probate system—strange as the fact may seem to a lawyer unacquainted with it—works well, for reasons which I have not time now to explain.

By permission of the State the town exercises many other rights and powers, rights and powers which the State could take away, but is not likely to take away—many of them being consecrated by tradition and rooted in the habits of the people.

It exercises control over public education within its limits and generally over all its local affairs.

Its board of health is vested with those great and indefinite "police powers," so called, over persons and property which must be vested somewhere for the protection of the public health.

It legislates in town meetings on a great variety of subjects specially enumerated in the statute book;—and, finally, it possesses the broad general powers expressed by the statute in these words: "Towns may make such regulations for their welfare, not concerning matters of a criminal nature nor repugnant to the laws of the State, as they may deem expedient, and enforce them by penalties not exceeding five dollars for each breach." Am I not right, then, in saying that this town of Woodstock is a republic, a free Democratic republic, an *indestructible republic*, exercising great and various powers of government, many of which are beyond the reach of interference, even from the government of the State itself?

This little republic has another indefeasible right—the right of

sending two representatives to every session of the General Assembly—an immemorial right which the government of the State cannot infringe.

Connecticut is a small State, almost invisible among the greater States of this Union, and yet within her narrow limits are one hundred and sixty-seven of these little republics. By their indissoluble union they constitute the State, and exercise through the State government those governmental powers which it is practically impossible for them to exercise individually.

This system of town government more or less closely resembles that which prevails in some of the other States, especially the other New England States, but I think, although I will not positively assert, that here in Woodstock, and in the other Connecticut towns, the Democratic principle of government *by* the people is carried out more radically and protected more thoroughly by constitutional safeguards than it is in almost any other State or country in the world.

I do not say that this system has no defects. It has defects which in some of the larger towns have made necessary the establishment of supplementary city and borough organizations, (also democratic in character, however,) to co-operate with the town organizations within those towns.

I do not say that the system is perfect in all other respects, I do say that it forms a broad and deep and granitic base for the free commonwealth which for two centuries and a half has rested firmly upon it. It has answered for us the question whether a republican government can long endure. For since it was established here kingdoms and empires have risen and fallen, while it has remained unshaken.

For two hundred and fifty years this system has existed in Connecticut, varying in details, but unchanged in principle and substance. It has been strong in peace and strong in war. If you ask whether it has promoted the happiness and prosperity of the people look around you.

Here then, if anywhere, may we appropriately celebrate the birth of the Great Republic; here in the center of the little republic of Woodstock, a republic older than the Great Republic itself, though younger by more than a hundred years than some of her little sister republics of Connecticut.

Most cordially do I unite with my fellow citizens in welcoming our distinguished guests to Woodstock, to Windham county, and to the State of Connecticut.





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